

VZCZCXRO4382
RR RUEHDBU RUEHPW RUEHSL
DE RUEHBUL #2010/01 2040753
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 230753Z JUL 09
FM AMEMBASSY KABUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0325
INFO RUCNAFG/AFGHANISTAN COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 002010

DEPARTMENT FOR SRAP, SCA/FO, SCA/A, EUR/RPM
STATE PASS TO AID FOR ASIA/SCAA
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SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [AF](#)
SUBJECT: Provincial Council Elections

Summary

¶1. The picture of Provincial Council (PC) elections across Afghanistan is diverse, and liveliest in the biggest provinces. Security concerns - of particular importance to female candidates - and lack of financing have the greatest impact on the level and type of campaign activities among the candidates. Tribal politics, though difficult to observe overtly, undoubtedly will have significant influence on the outcome of the PC elections. Many candidates appear to be waiting until the last possible moment to select a president candidate to endorse, on the expectation that reciprocal support will be forthcoming.

Security A Major Obstacle
to Overt Campaign Activity

¶2. Security is a major issue in many provinces, especially throughout southern and eastern Afghanistan and parts of the north. For example, in the northern province of Kunduz, security is the most challenging issue for PC candidates and prevents candidates from organizing public PC-oriented rallies. Instead, candidates meet with people in small village gatherings and in shuras with village elders. In some provinces, such as Gardez and Zabul, candidates are not traveling outside the provincial capitals or Kabul, instead asking village elders to come to them. Kunduz, likewise, reports that it is considered high risk for candidates to travel to at least four districts for campaigning purposes is considered high risk and they maintain a low profile when talking to voters in those districts.

¶3. We hear a similar story in Paktika and Khost provinces, where, aside from some posters of incumbents in the provincial capitals, there are no visible signs of campaigning. Incumbents in both provinces rarely travel to their home districts or far beyond the capitals because of insecurity. IEC District Field Coordinators (DFCs) from a number of districts in Khost report there is no evidence of campaigning in villages. Though it is difficult for PRT reps to observe this activity directly, we believe most candidates plan to use their connections with tribal elders to gain votes. While many candidates are waiting until closer to the election to campaign in order to preserve scarce funds, there is almost universal consensus that fear of anti-government elements is the primary reason for the limited campaign activity in these areas.

¶4. In contrast, more permissive Herat and Jalalabad are active political centers. Thousands of posters and banners line the streets of Herat City, for both presidential and provincial council candidates. Political rallies are common in Jalalabad. Activity is reportedly rising even in remote provinces such as Ghor. Posters are up in Ghor's provincial capital of Chaghcharan, and there is active campaigning and competition in the districts. While evidence of the election season is prominent, enthusiasm is subdued. In the eastern province of Kunar, banners and posters decorate provincial capital Asadabad and many medium to large villages for many of the 57 PC candidates, and the PRT reports there have been several

rallies.

Links to Presidential campaign and Influence of Tribal Politics

¶15. Many of the provincial council candidates are reportedly affiliated with presidential candidates, especially Karzai and Dr. Abdullah, but PRT representatives overwhelmingly report that these links are difficult to confirm. There are several examples of PC candidates admitting that, while they prefer a particular presidential candidate, their support could change if reciprocity is not offered. Candidates, particularly incumbents, appear to have a strong preference to wait until the "winner" is a foregone conclusion before endorsing a presidential candidate.

¶16. The presidential race continues to dominate the political scene. In some provinces, such as Zabul, PC candidates have been seen campaigning for a presidential candidate at the same time as for themselves. In Zabul, almost all of these candidates endorse Karzai and mention of their own candidacies appears as if an afterthought. Zabul PC Chairman Haji Mohammed Hashim Grani, who is running for re-election, has referred to this practice as "killing two birds with one stone" and noted that PC candidates in Zabul wouldn't campaign for themselves only. None of the Zabul PC members expressed support for the former Taliban presidential candidate Abdu Salam Raketi, who is an MP from Kabul.

¶17. The perception from PRT reps is that voters will select their candidate according to tribal affiliations. While some contacts connected with candidates admit this upfront, most skirt that issue or deny that tribal politics play a role.

KABUL 00002010 002 OF 002

Desire for Representative Government, and Other Reasons to Seek Office

¶18. The approximately 3200 candidates for 420 Provincial Council seats throughout the country are viewed as a testament to a nascent desire among Afghans for representative government. However, in areas with active and muted campaign scenes alike, PRT reps caution that the population is not terribly energized by the PC race. Suspicion and apathy is high. Although a number of candidates are passionate and want to make a difference, people are not necessarily seeking to change politics. Additionally, Afghan citizens seem to have little understanding of the greater process.

¶19. There are several concrete reasons for the high number of candidates:

- Provincial Councils are perceived many as influential positions and an opportunity to benefit from CERP and other development contracts.
- Desire to expand influence of one's tribe in provincial government so as to bring benefits to home town/district.
- Incumbents who are able to run want to keep their positions.
- Many candidates are running for PC as a stepping stone to parliament.
- Certain tribes appear to be attempting to expand their influence through some PCs, such as those in Paktika, Paktya and Ghor. Though there are differences, PCs in those and other provinces do not have representation from every tribe in their respective provinces.

Female Candidates

¶10. By law, one quarter of PC seats are set aside for women, and all but two of those 125 seats - in Uruzgan and Kandahar - have a potential candidate. In some provinces, the number of female candidates registered matches the number of seats for women, while elsewhere many female candidates will contest only a few seats. Security is the biggest challenge for women who wish to campaign. Particularly in more conservative areas, it is difficult for women

to appear in public outside the provincial capital. However, there are examples, even in conservative Zabul, of the unveiled faces of female candidates on campaign posters. There has been little to no visible public campaigning activity among female candidates.

Comment

¶11. Only a month before elections, the Provincial Council candidates seem to be working behind the scenes. Public campaign efforts are hampered by lack of financing everywhere, and by insecurity in large swaths of the country. We expect to see increased campaign activities among the Provincial Council candidates as the elections draw closer, and as candidates agree to endorse one another.

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